

**Education Committee
Wednesday, March 15, 2023**

House Bill 6881: An Act Concerning Various Revisions to the Education Statutes Related to Educator Compensation and Paraeducators - Support

Senator McCrory, Representative Currey, Senator Berthel, Representative McCarty and members of the Education Committee:

My name is Victoria Ceylan and I am a resident of Bridgewater here in Connecticut. I work as a paraeducator in Danbury Public Schools at Granville Avenue School. I offer the following testimony in support of HB 6881: An Act Concerning Various Revisions to the Education Statutes Related to Educator Compensation and Paraeducators:

Paraeducators are on the front lines of student learning. We provide one-on-one assistance to special education students, reinforce instruction, manage classrooms and support English language learners. We celebrate with our students when they succeed and try to redirect them when they act out verbally and physically. Despite the important roles we play, paraeducators are among the lowest paid staff members in our schools. We can't afford our healthcare and there is little chance we can afford to retire with dignity - unless we work a second or third job. We don't get paid during the summer and we can't collect unemployment.

There is no wonder paraeducators are leaving the profession in droves, leaving more than 1,300 paraeducator positions vacant in districts throughout the state. HB 6881 is an important step in improving the work life and career opportunities of Connecticut's paraeducators. But most of all this bill is an opportunity to begin to treat paraeducators with the respect and dignity we have earned.

I work in the pre-k program for our district where the students are ages 3-5. We lay the educational foundation for our youngest learners. I have the most incredible Principal and our staff of teachers and paraeducators are second to none. We all work together to ensure that our students can be the best that they can be. The teachers and administrators set educational goals for each of our special education students and it is our job to implement those goals and support our students and teachers. Paraeducators are the key to each student's success within the school.

We are with our students from the beginning of their day until the time they leave. We teach our students social skills, coping skills and support standards based learning. We conduct small group

instruction and individual instruction. I personally collect data on each one of my special education students daily. We also manage behaviors and follow behavior intervention plans set forth by teachers and behavior specialists. We monitor every student carefully to ensure their safety and care for the physical needs of our most medically fragile students. As you can see, we don't just teach our students their ABC's and 123's. That would be far too easy. We do so much more than what anyone sees or imagines.

Unfortunately, with all the wonderful education that we provide for our students, we are understaffed and underpaid. I have been a paraeducator since 2014 and I still don't make \$16 per hour. That is BEFORE taxes, medical, dental and vision insurance. Do the math and you will see how little I bring home. In this economy where a dozen eggs cost between \$6-\$8, a gallon of milk is close to \$5 and electricity is through the roof, many paraeducators find themselves working 2-3 jobs. We cannot survive on this salary alone and struggle to put food on the table for our families. We also cannot ignore the fact that we only work September through June and do not get paid in the summer months and are not allowed to collect unemployment. How do paraeducators survive financially, you ask? They can't just on this salary alone. Yet the ones who have been in this job for a while, do it because they love their job and know they make a difference in the lives of children.

Paraeducators are struggling all over the state. We are underpaid and understaffed. There are so many positions unfilled in all districts which means the ones that do work are doing the job of 2-3 paras. We run all day long and by the end of the day we are exhausted. Some go home to take care of their children while others go right to another job just to make ends meet. We need help and we are asking you for your support. If we can make more money, our existing paras would want to stay in the profession and I believe more will want to become paraeducators. Right now there is no incentive to stay or come into the school systems. We must be compensated fairly and equally. Our pay must be sustainable so that we don't have to worry about what bills we cannot pay in any given month, or how we will put food on the table or whether or not we can afford to see a doctor because our high deductible hasn't been met. We want to continue to make a difference in the lives of our special needs students but we need your help to ensure our security and safety.

Why am I so passionate about my job? I am the mother of a son with cerebral palsy. I was told that he would never walk, talk or amount to anything. He is now a senior at UConn (Go Huskies) and could never have come this far without the help of his paraeducators. From age 3-18, my son AJ had a 1:1 paraeducator with him at all times while he was at school. I cannot thank each of them enough for what they have done for my son, preparing him for his higher education. He will be

graduating in May with a bachelor's degree in Speech and Hearing Sciences, with the hope of going on to get his Doctorate in Audiology. AJ would not be where he is today without the dedication, experience and knowledge of his paraeducators. I will forever be grateful to each and every one of them. THIS is why I became a paraprofessional. I want to give back to the community that gave so much to my son.

Now is the time for this committee and all the members of the General Assembly to take immediate and meaningful action to raise paraeducator pay, lower our healthcare costs, ensure we have meaningful retirement benefits and give us the tools we need to help students succeed.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today. Please support student learning by prioritizing paraeducators and passing HB 6881.

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